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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 007750

SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PTER](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: SOUTHERN VIOLENCE: BANGKOK MUSLIMS TRY TO BRIDGE THE GAP

REF: A) BANGKOK 002260 B) BANGKOK 007462

Classified By: CHARGE D'AFFAIRS ALEXANDER A. ARVIZU FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

11. (C) Summary. In separate meetings with poloffs, officials from both the private Bangkok-based Islamic Center of Thailand and the government-affiliated Central Islamic Committee underscored their belief that the violence in the South is not a religious conflict and outlined their efforts to improve the government's policy in the restive South as well as Buddhist-Muslim relations. Both sides were diplomatic in their criticism of the government and took pains to downplay any radical Islamic influence in the violence or tensions between Buddhists and Muslims. We were struck by their sanguine attitude. Their insistence that the perpetrators of the violence are mostly drug-traffickers or smugglers reflects the continuing disconnect between the ethnic-Malay Muslims in the troubled South and the well-integrated, ethnic-Thai Muslims in Bangkok. End Summary.

#### THE ISLAMIC CENTER OF THAILAND

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12. (SBU) Poloffs met with Niti Hassan, President of the Council of Muslim Organizations of Thailand, and Pakorn Priyakorn, Secretary General of the Islamic Center of Thailand on December 13 in Bangkok. (Note. The center is home to the aforementioned council. End Note) Niti and Pakorn explained that the Islamic Center is the locus of private Muslim organizations in Thailand and also home to the largest mosque in the country. Regular Friday services attract approximately 2,000 worshipers, with holidays drawing up to 5,000. Muslims from Bangkok's international community, including the diplomatic corps, are frequent guests; center officials have been busy this month helping to plan the King of Jordan's visit and planned speech at the center.

13. (C) The center also provides training for local Thai Muslim leaders from the provincial Islamic committees and helps provide construction and maintenance assistance to the nearly 3,400 mosques in Thailand. Their own budget is dependent on private donations, although the central Thai government provided nearly half of the funds to construct the center's mosque. Recently, the center has worked with the Ministry of Interior to conduct a program that takes southern Thai Muslims to visit peaceful (read, integrated and ethnic-Thai, not Malay) Muslim communities in other parts of the country.

#### DIPLOMATIC ON THE SOUTH

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14. (C) Niti and Pakorn echoed the comments of many of our interlocutors on the South by unequivocally stating that the violence is "not a religious conflict." Aside from a few right-wing Buddhists, interfaith relations are healthy. The violence is the result of many factors and "misperceptions" among the southern Thai; most southern Thai Muslims love the King and do not support violence. According to Niti and Pakorn, the national election earlier this year "proves" that the majority of southerners are likewise uninterested in separatism. Southerners voted against Thaksin, for sure, but they still voted, signifying some support for the established political process and the Thai state. Some southerners remain concerned that central government involvement in the local educational system is reminiscent of earlier attempts to forcefully assimilate them, but this is a relatively minor issue involving at most, "maybe 100 pondoks." The true source of the violence is complicated, but driven by competing "interest groups," such as narcotics traffickers, other smugglers and local politicians.

15. (C) When asked how they, as Thai Muslims, thought of Thaksin and his government, there was a short pause. Both were quick to profess their personal support for the Thai state and love for the monarchy in particular. More specifically, Pakorn explained that Thaksin is a "smooth politician" and Niti added that the center has "good relations" with his government. As evidence of his support for the Muslim community, the Prime Minister helped set up the Islamic Bank of Thailand and employs Muslim advisers.

16. (C) That said, both Niti and Pakorn "want (Thaksin) to listen more." The National Reconciliation Commission is a

step in the right direction, but only if the government actually implements its recommendations. The people trust the courts and broader justice system, but not the police. As an example of the latter, Pakorn raised the case of Somchai Neelapaijit, the prominent Muslim defense attorney who "disappeared" in March 2004--many Thai believe at the hands of the police. Pakorn added that he noticed that we had mentioned Somchai in the Embassy's annual human rights report last year, and appreciated it.

#### THE ISLAMIC VOICE IN GOVERNMENT

17. (SBU) Separately on December 15, Polcounselor and poloffs met with the Central Islamic Committee's Somchai Jewangma, spokesman for the official head of Thailand's Muslim community, the Chularatchamontri. (Note. Ref A describes the Ambassador's meeting with the Chularatchamontri in March. End Note.) Somchai (not to be confused with the defense attorney mentioned earlier), outlined the duties of the Chularatchamontri's office: advising and educating government officials, and serving as a central authority on religious issues for Thailand's Muslims. The Chularatchamontri serves as the head of the Central Islamic Committee (CIC), which is comprised of 36 provincial members, 11 appointees and the Chula.

18. (C) When asked about the South, Somchai quickly stated that "this is not a religious problem." Most Muslims are "good" and support the government, monarchy and constitution. There are no serious problems between Buddhists and Muslims and the resurgence of violence is due to several factors, including the familiar narco-criminals, smugglers and local politicians. It is not the duty of the Chularatchamontri to solve this problem.

19. (C) That said, the Chula's office is actively engaged in supporting government efforts to find a solution. Some military and civilian personnel transferring to the South attend a seminar on Islam run by the CIC. The Chula is also involved in the Ministry of Defense's effort to train and support a cadre of pro-government Islamic preachers, the "Da I" (ref B). So far, the program has trained 200 teachers and 700 youth. Moreover, the Chula is in frequent contact with senior Thai officials, who often consult with him on Islamic and southern issues.

110. (C) When pressed on the issue of problems in the southern educational system, Somchai (a native of Bangkok) evinced some frustration, explaining that, with all of the attention on the southern provinces, the schools in that region have a wealth of resources that poor Muslim students in Bangkok will never have. When asked if violence could spread outside of the deep South, Somchai replied in the negative. Central Thai Muslims are more "neutral" and assimilated than those in the South. In an attempt to emphasize how different the Bangkok and southern Muslim communities are, Somchai stated (without appreciation for irony) that "southerners are close minded."

#### COMMENT

111. (C) Bangkok's moderate Muslim leaders are seeking to play a positive role in the troubled South, but their impact likely will be limited. They lack the necessary influence with the Thaksin government and are seen by many southerners as more "Thai" (and beholden to the government) than they are Muslim. For their part, some of Bangkok's Muslim leaders are not entirely successful at hiding their disdain for their poorer and less-well-integrated "cousins" in the South.

112. (C) It is also troubling that, some time after senior government officials, including Thaksin, stopped blaming local politicians and druglords for the violence and acknowledged the underlying ethnic and cultural roots of the conflict, these well-educated (and integrated) Thai Muslim leaders still seem to be in some denial. Their downplaying of rising Buddhist-Muslim tensions suggests either an unfortunate lack of knowledge on the situation in the South, or willful self-delusion. This misconception underscores the serious disconnect between the ethnic-Malay Muslims of the South and the ethnic-Thai Muslims in the rest of the country. It also suggests the difficulty in trying to apply "lessons learned" about non-ethnic Malay Muslims in Thailand to the conflict in southern Thailand.